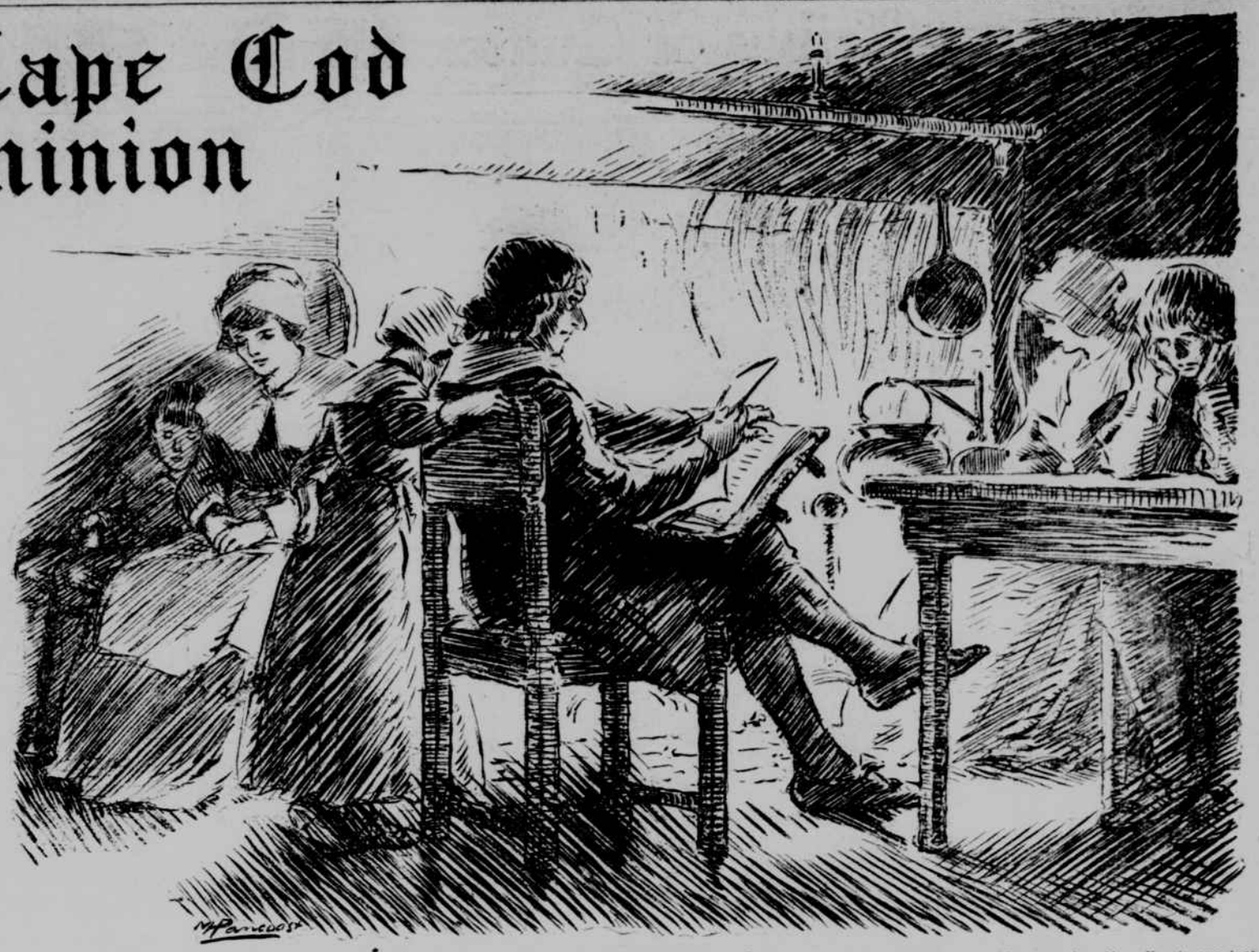
Christmas from Cape Cod to the Old Dominion



THERE have been many and strange Christmases in this new and still strange land—cheerful Christmases, glum ones, drunken ones, masked ones, murderous ones: a startling medley of pleasures and pains, which all had to be gone through before the peace came upon the earth that has meant Yuletide's real season of good will to all men.

By the time the war of independence welded a nation together, most of these discordant elements had been burned out of us. The New Englander had long since ceased to make his Christmas a time of protestant, grim disdain; the Cavalier in the Old Dominion had won through the necessity of going gunning for the aborigines whom his gay, impudent presence irritated. The members of the Society of Friends had not acknowledged the holiday in Philadelphia, for there old ways clung fast. But already the national spirit was achieving a unity of expression for its happiness, as it had merged into a unity of indignant revolt against its wrongs.

Over all the inspiration of the new and modern Christmas breathed, preparing Americans for the great feast day they had inherited from Europe in a way that should be nationally distinctive and should, in the century to come, carry its touch of reverence, with its wealth of good cheer, across a continent and make it the year's most blissful day in mountains known then only as fables and in deserts that have only now been taught to bloom.

There is, perhaps, less variety in the American Christmas than there is in the observance of the Fourth of July, and that in spite of the millions on millions of alien customs which have been brought in from abroad, to perish, quickly and surely, in the robust presence of the modern Christmas turkey, the tree and the jubilant turmoil. He who could have made a series of Christmas tours, year by year, from one little section of the country to another before they all became united, would have had recollections of the day to treasure and tell unequaled by any world traveler's.

To us, with our Christmas immutably fixed in our affections as the day which we would make a time of pleasure, though we did so as a duty, the most shocking of all the old Christmases would be the one that the early Puritans required—the Christmas which was no Christmas at all.

They thought they had good reason. Their very lives, their every breath, were so many protests against the pitiful gayety, the loose license of the holidays observed in England, as their glum, austere religion was their protest against the pomp and ceremony they had so wrathfully left behind them. Their very laws forbade public celebration of the ancient holy days, which because of their jocund joviality stank in good Puritan nostrils.

The Puritans were not alone in their condemnation, even though they took to themselves whatever credit there was in it. There were men in the Church of England who deplored the excesses of the Lord of Misrule, and regarded with indignation the revelers' rowdy sports and their invasion of the sacred edifices of England during the very hours when solemn services were in progress.

"Wanton, baccanalian Christmases," to quote one old diatribe, "were spent throughout England in revelling, dicing, carding, masking, mumming, consumed in compotations, in interludes, in excess of wine, in mad mirth."

When the Puritans had landed and got down to business they sternly, solemnly ignored this Christmas which had grown so wicked and sinful that they must needs flee from it for the good of their souls. Their very first Christmas on the new shores eliminated the whole joyous festival from their calendar, and did it in the most effective, if unpleasant, of ways. Everybody had to work.

Governor Bradford noted down the fact that "Ye 25 day, begane to erect ye first house for common use to receive them and their goods."

A workday Christmas! Can any of us imagine a whole community enduring it more than once? Well, the Puritans did, and right along, too. When their second Christmas came around there were some new members who had joined the community later, and they regarded the prospect of work on Christmas with feelings akin to horror, so they handed strict old Bradford the excuse which has been worked overtime ever since, principally against doing juror duty at long murder trials—they said such a proceeding hurt their consciences.

"Well," answered the governor, "methinks I can spare you until you shall have better informed your consciences."

He went about his business; but returned at noon. And he found the lesser consciences impelling the husky bodies to play stool-ball and pitch-the-bar in the street.

"I find it gravely against my conscience," he remarked to them, "that you should play while others work. If you will not work, you must not play."

With a precedent set like that it is no wonder that one Christmas after another became more and more commonplace, more matter-of-fact, more humdrum. Its name was a thing of sin and shame; whoever dared refrain from work, whoever feasted or observed it as a holiday in any fashion whatever, was liable to be fined five shillings. That was in 1659, and it went on for twenty years. Finally the Church of England managed to secure the institution in Boston of some appropriate services, but that only served, in the eyes of the stern Pilgrim Fathers, to separate the sheep of righteousness from the goats of disorder.

It went on that way until even after the revolution, for it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that Christmas was a real holiday throughout New England. Yet, side by side with the Puritan grimness, there existed in Narragansett, which had been settled by rich adherents of the temple of the Church of England, the genuine Yuletide of the mother country, a fortnight of feasting and visiting, in which all, planters and slaves, shared with the utmost freedom from Puritan restraint.

While the Pilgrim Fathers were of a Christmas evening grimly droning through the Scriptures—and doing it grudgingly, at that—for the benefit of the Priscillas, John Aldens and Fare-You-Wells and Lord-Make-Us-Grateful-But-Not-Too-Gratefuls assembled around the glowering un-Christmassy fire, the Cavaliers of Virginia were out shooting Indians. Christmas was one of the Old Dominion's open seasons for Indians, and if it was bloody, it was at least a Yuletide observance of some sort, which was more than New England permitted.

Captain John Smith—he of Pocahontas fame—was the gallant gentleman who instituted the Indian gunning season, his chosen victim being the old Emperor Powhatan. John Esten Cooke, in a very thorough historical study of Christmas as observed in Virginia, explains that Powhatan started it by having the brave captain made a prisoner at Yuletide in the woods of the York. After Pocahontas had saved him and Powhatan had spared him, Captain John laid low for another winter and then, choosing fifty of his hardiest companions, set out through snow and ice to show Powhatan how very dangerous it was to spare any Englishman when he had him where the hair was short. But the Indian killers kept their Christmas just the same, for, as the chronicler of the expedition wrote: "The extreme winde, rayne, frost and snow caused us to keepe Christmas among the salvages, where we weere never more merry, nor fed on more plenty of good Oysters, Fish, Flesh, Wilde fowl and good bread, nor never had better fires in England."

The rule of Christmas Indian hunting was kept active for a long time. Three seasons there were in the year when the red man was to be gunned for, and especially "before the frost of Christmas" the Virginia adventurers were called upon to arm themselves and raid the forests on the banks of the rivers "from Ploneer de Hundred to Accomack; and whosoever should be lamed should be cured at the public expense."

It was not long, however, before the Indians ceased to find it worth while to fight for their land, at least as a regular thing and often enough to make the Christmas hunt necessary. The planter was secure in his solid stone manor house, its palisades stout enough to stand off a tribe, and its shutters barred with big beams of oak or with heavy wrought iron, was practically impregnable to any chance assault. He invited his neighbors to come and enjoy the Christmas mirth and feasting in the good old English style.

A Cheerful Dutch Christmas

There are plenty of quaint sketches to be found among the old records that depict a Dominion Yuletide in its lavish hospitality. The commander of a hundred wore gold lace on his clothes, and others might not indulge in such a frippery; his dame was stately in high heels and an Elizabethan ruff; his children and grandchildren tried to practice decorum about a laden board that incited to juvenile riot; his sleek Africans, who had voyaged out of their mysterious continent on some Dutch ship with terrors dogging their wake, peered in at their master with redoubled of his smiling content burnishing their black faces into wide, corrugating laughter.

They had their share of good things; the ale and strong waters could no more be kept from their deft fingers and capacious maws than they could be kept in their quarters when any excitement reigned within a mile.

Nor was their master inclined to stint them; his Christmas was their Christmas, and they imbibed an undying faith that if Christmas came but once a year, "Christmas gift" must come, too, from some unaccountable but wholly blessed dispensation of the white man's providence.

They imbibed another faith, too—simple, unalloyed with doubt or skepticism—which accepted Christianity in its primitive essence and satisfied them more than the most elaborate system of theology can satisfy its scrupulous devotees. And it lasted—lasted long after they were freed. You may still hear some old, old mammy croon the Christmas hymn those early slaves made their own:

Oh, chillun, Christ is come
To heal you of yo' danger;
Pray that you may be reconciled
To the Child that lays in the manger.

They were getting their religion straight from its old English source, from Cavaliers with flowing locks who clung to the immemorial festivals of the English Church, with Christmas first among them all.

Throughout Virginia the homes and churches were festooned with evergreens in honor of the day. In the great manor house at Tidewater the festivities were of the most generous description. The family clan assembled included both sexes and all ages; the vast fireplace—for they still loved good fires, although far removed from the dampness of England—roared with its lavish supply of logs, and lighted up the quaint old furniture; the hounds stretched on the floor in front of the blaze; there was a clinking of cups and glasses; the lord of the manor, upstanding, drank the health of all around him. The butler was of a blackness seldom found these days, when the white strain has mellowed the original sable.

Virginia ham—where can anything be found to surpass it?—replaced the ancient boar's head, and the noble turkey, superior to pheasant or peacock, was flanked by Sir Loin fattened on blue grass and Indian corn.

Virginia claims the glory of inventing for its Christmas feasts that time-honored delight of the rich and comfort of the poor, eggnog, and its planters served that exquisite substitute for England rum and ale, and crabs in a huge silver bowl.

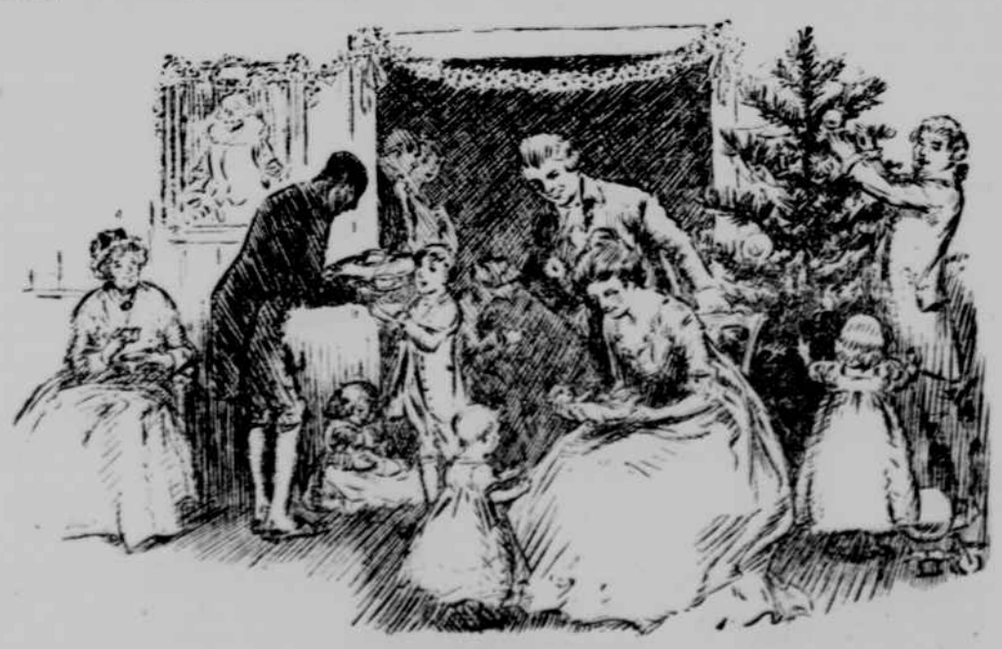
You ladies, who now have fitted your suffrage movement with seven-league boots to stride across the continent west to east, must remember to take off your hats to the Old Dominion when you arrive in Washington to inaugurate your first president, for it was there, in the dining rooms of the old manor houses, that woman's rights really had birth, and the gallant Cavaliers fathered them.

In England for hundreds of years afterward the ladies had to leave the table when the toasts began. But in Virginia, after the plum pudding was borne away, ladies and children remained and shared in the clean, honest joviality inspired by the rich madeira. That brave old practice, with its bold disregard of precedent, most sacred of all English institutions, anticipated the Declaration of Independence; maybe it was that innovation which gave the whole nation its first instinct for freedom.

There are those who contend that, under the surface of things, Philadelphia is still the most English city in the United States. Boston by no means excepted. There is no question that it kept the most distinctively English Christmas, although the long-dominant element, the Friends, did not incline to the commemoration of holidays, and were supported in their disapproval by the more rigid among the Protestant denominations, but Episcopalians, Roman Catholics and Lutherans were all inclined to make Christmas a time of family reunion as well as a religious festival, and much of the modern Christmas is directly traceable to their influence.

The traditional Christmas dinner—turkey, plum pudding, mince pie—the candy-filled stocking, are attributed to those of English descent, and perhaps the Friends and their Protestant allies did not altogether resist these pleasant amenities of the season.

The Germans introduced the now universal Christmas tree, a custom that has extended the country over. The closing of the Yule season by shooting out



Christmas in the Old Dominion

The Puritan Christmas

the old year has been credited to German origin, but historical research takes it back directly to an English practice of the late fall, which was founded in the superstition that it promoted the fruitfulness of orchards.

These opposing attitudes toward Christmas account for the conflicting recollections of Christmas on the part of local centenarians, just as old Boston people might be found who believe that Christmas is a sort of modern innovation. But one feature of Philadelphia's old-time Christmas was so conspicuous that it dominated the streets of the town and gave the staid old city on Christmas eve a life that was to be paralleled only in those of an earlier London.

The Christmas "mummers," bands of young people disguised under masks of all sorts, who went about Philadelphia singing quaint old songs and demanding dole of the houses at which they knocked, were the descendants of England's ancient Lord of Misrule, whose rowdy antics were chief among the antipathies of the Puritans for the English Christmas. With patriotic assurance, after the revolution, the Philadelphia mummers appropriated the English mummers' songs and altered them into insults for their traditional foes.

Where St. George in England was acclaimed as slaughtering the dragon, in Philadelphia he became George Washington, while the dragon typified British tyranny; but all the characters were taken from English Christmas mummery. If they were political, the song they sang might begin, paraphrasing England's St. George:

Here am I, great Washington.
On my shoulder I carry a gun—

If they weren't, irreverence played the devil with them, thus:

Here comes I, old Beelzebub.
On my shoulder I carry a club.
In my hand a dripping pan—
Don't you think I'm a jolly old man?

There was one strictly American role, with American verses to it that have all the strong tang of the soil in that early day. National self-consciousness had already grown so pronounced that over the old, familiar masks Cooney Cracker long remained best liked:

Here comes I, old Cooney Cracker!
I swear to God my wife chews tobacker!
A pipe is good; cigars are better,
When I get married I'll send you a letter.

Philadelphia has never been without its mummers, although long since they have disappeared from their native England, unless some stray, weak imitation of them survives in a forgotten hamlet there. As the years went by after the civil war the mummers changed the date of their appearance from Christmas to New Year's eve, largely because the pleasures of Christmas in the home made demands too great upon every household the night before to allow of interest in street amusements.

The New Year "shooters," with their wild tumult at midnight about Independence Hall, afforded a fitting interlude for the fantastic parades, and London never saw such immense throngs, so noisily and strangely rejoicing, as did Philadelphia during the last quarter of the last century. Then, when the new century came in, the New Year's mummers began to assume an importance of almost civic dignity; organization and system made a series of imposing parades out of them; the old, roistering New Year's eve lost its mummery and a good deal of its orgy, and New Year's day acquired an event which, until the present, remains something worth going many miles to see, as much for its remarkable proof of the vitality of ancient custom as for its inherent picturesqueness.

As for the Dutch in little old New York, they went to it from the first tap of the bell. There wasn't any New York, or New Amsterdam, either, little or big, when those first jolly Dutchmen sailed overseas and actually brought St. Nicholas along with them. He was the figurehead of the first emigrant ship from Holland that touched the shores of Manhattan Island; and the tiny Dutch dorp was no sooner born there than he was adopted as its patron saint.

So New York, if any of the cities of this country can claim St. Nicholas, has a right to him as its very own.

Those early Dutch were born Christmas-lovers, both for the religious and the lay observance of the feast. In the Dutch states, however fiery the controversies, everybody clung to Christmas as a time of peace, goodwill and merrymaking. When the emigrants found themselves alone in the far wilderness they put up their native windmills for the nourishment of their bodies, and promptly held services in the mill lofts for the salvation of their souls.

After that, they went straight home to the biggest Christmas dinner they could concoct; and then indulged in games and sports with the same delight displayed by the pagans who had done likewise in the ages when Christianity was unknown.

Other colonies might forbid Christmas joys, but not the Dutch of New Amsterdam. No sooner had the settlement attained the dignity of a town than the government itself indorsed the whole delightful holiday season. Houses and churches were decorated with evergreens; all business was suspended; the corporation itself passed resolutions officially retiring from municipal activity until the more important duty of having a good time should have been amply performed, as witness this record inscribed in the old archives treasured in New York's city hall:

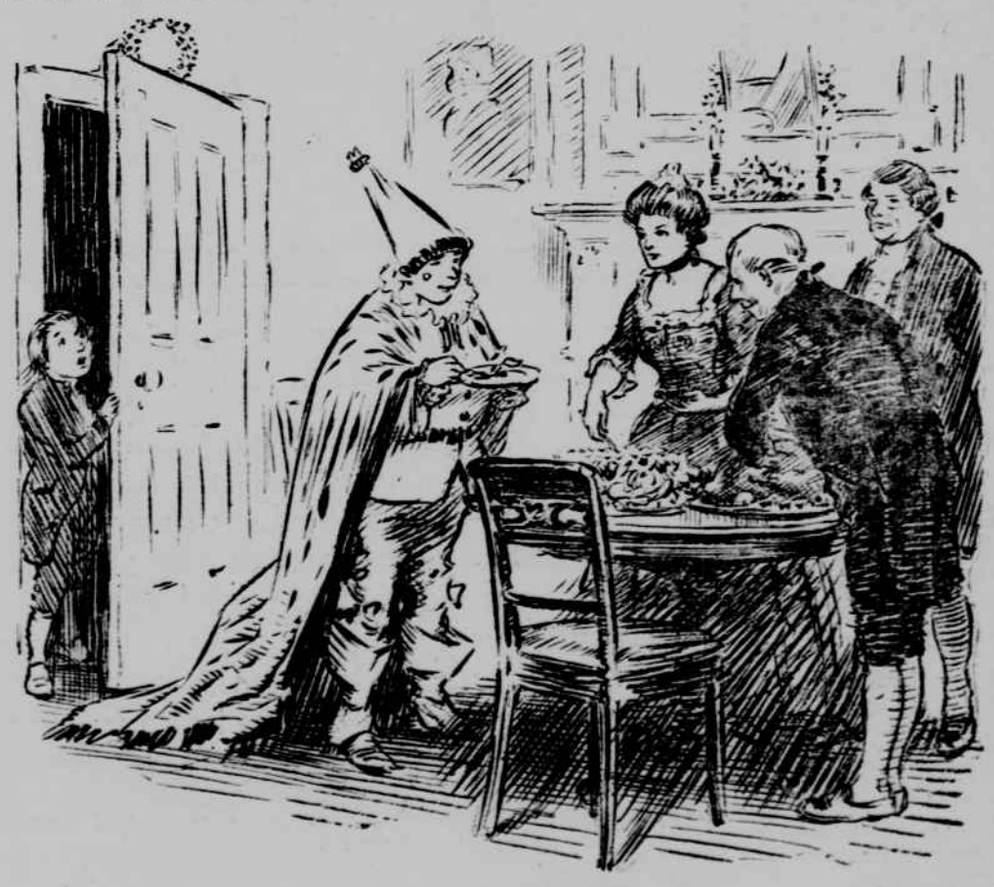
December 14, 1654—As the winter and the holidays are at hand, there shall be no more ordinary meetings of this board [the city corporation] between this date and three weeks after Christmas. The court messenger is ordered not to summon any one in the meantime.

Many years before Santa Claus paid any attention at all to the children of the other settlements, he made it his regular custom to drive over the low roofs of New Amsterdam behind his reindeer team, bringing loads of gifts for the little Dutch children.

The Christmas dinner, the family gathering, the holiday frolics were joyous affairs that were filled with the spirit of carefree jollity. The Dutch were sturdy drinkers, too, and a Christmas then, if it were not excessively intemperate, never failed of a copious supply of beer, wines and gin. The outdoor sports were planned for the utmost quaintness and humor, for your Dutchman, unjustly pictured as heavily phlegmatic, dearly loved his joke, and the more rough and tumble it was, the more fun he got out of it.

Only once did authority visit on the Christmas sports its awful disapproval. That was when dignified Peter Stuyvesant discerned in the heathenish custom a tendency to turmoil that, in his opinion, called for abatement. When the people appalled to him for permission to "ride the goose," a pastime conducive to much laughter among the beholders, his excellency refused, with his accustomed decision and no small display of his familiar choler.

Yet he was no Puritan, and in his own household Christmas brought all the good cheer and all the frolic and fun which young people may enjoy, if they do not go too far in their exuberance.



A Philadelphia Christmas